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REMINISCENCES OF JOHN BRIGHT.

BY HIS NEPHEW, CHARLES McLAREN.

A SIMPLE stone marks the resting place of John Bright in the Friends' Burial Ground in Rochdale. For well-nigh a century he, and his Quaker parents before him, had worshipped in the old-world meeting-house, whose plain and spotless interior is less part of the busy Rochdale of to-day, with its dark chimneys and countless shuttles, than of the clean, quiet old town on the fringe of the moors forming the breezy borderland between Lancashire and Yorkshire eighty years ago.

Tim Bobbin and Edwin Waugh have made the rich, quaint tongue of that countryside live in our literature. Wit, common sense, and outspoken fearlessness characterize those who speak it. Here, as in most English towns before the railway age, lived apart a smaller Quaker community, with the Puritan tradition undefiled, and from it sprang the foremost Liberal of these times. Just as the key to Mr. Gladstone's mental history is to be found in his Eton and Oxford life, so John Bright's inherited impulse to battle against greed and oppression in Church and State was intensified by these surroundings of his early years. They colored his nature as man and politician. He was trained from the first to political thought and effort. His father used to read the *Manchester Guardian* aloud on Saturday evenings to the children, while he talked of the days of Pitt and Castlereagh, and told them of the Luddites and of political persecutions that filled their hearts with hatred of Tory power and Tory principles. So, at a time when Bamford, Carlisle and "Orator" Hunt were already to the front in the struggle for Parliamentary Reform, the first public act of John Bright's childhood was to chalk "Hunt forever!" on the steps of his father's cotton mill. His literary tastes were formed and amply satisfied in the Quaker home life at Green Bank, where books filled the place of more frivolous amusements in the outside world. For the rest, his education was found in riding, fishing, cricket, and so forth, in close association with the sons of his father's workpeople. And thus he

grew up a practical, straightforward man, knowing and caring for his countrymen ; an Englishman on the side of the English.

Among the earliest public lecturers in Birmingham was James Silk Buckingham, the founder of the original *Athenæum* paper. In moving a vote of thanks to him after a lecture in Rochdale, John Bright made his first speech. It is written in full, artificially constructed and polished, after the manner of a young literary hand. He subsequently wrote and delivered some lectures himself describing a journey to the Holy Land. Fluency and power he gained by speaking at political gatherings in the town, but this first effort is interesting as the key to the method of his oratory. While much of his language was coined on the spot from a mind familiar with every great English writer of verse or of prose, his arguments and illustrations, together with his perorations and many of his more striking passages, were carefully composed and committed to paper in the form of elaborate notes. He studied the form as well as the subject of his speeches ; and his adherence from the first to good literary models kept him from degenerating into the merely fluent speaker.

Even his boyish letters were works of art. They breathed a tender sentiment which time never destroyed, and which gave a singular charm to his character. His devotion to his sister's and his childhood's home, where sweetbriar and roses crept around the door, and pears and cherries climbed over the plain red walls, helped to create in his mind that sense of the beauty and dignity of domestic life which runs through his speeches and touches every English heart. Shortly before his betrothal he wrote in French to his favorite sister, Priscilla :

"Our dispositions seem very much the same. The things you like I like, and what gives you no pleasure has no attraction for me. Still it is almost certain that this happy union between us will be severed ; perhaps you will have another companion in your journeys, and I shall be forced to seek elsewhere a partner of my joys and sorrows. But in every situation in which we may be placed we shall retain the same feelings for each other that we held in our youth ; and the love which exists now will forever remain to sweeten the misfortunes which may await us."

His letters to her breathe the warmest affection down to the close of his life, and though on many social and political questions he and his sisters and brothers held opposite opinions, those differences never interfered with their regard for one another.

It was not until his first wife's death in 1841 that John Bright

plunged into the struggle against the protective Corn Laws, which were starving trade and pauperizing the country in the interests of the land-owning aristocracy. Richard Cobden then urged him to organize with himself a campaign against the tax on bread. Thus began the intimate friendships between the two men to which John Bright owed much, but to which Richard Cobden owed even more. In two years John Bright's name was in every English mouth. He became the most powerful speaker of the Anti-Corn-Law League. After a free trade campaign, which culminated in the historic demonstration at Drury Lane Theatre, he was returned in 1843 in the Radical interest for Durham City. It was a rare thing in those days of restricted franchises for a man of the middle class to enter the House of Commons. The ringers and wardens of Rochdale Parish would have rung the bells, but for the threats of the Tory Vicar. Great, however, were the rejoicings of the people, and the man who came racing over the meadows to Green Bank got a guinea for his news. A few days later the father received from Sir Thomas Potter, a Manchester merchant, this letter.

"I beg most sincerely to congratulate you on the success of your talented son at Durham. When he returned from a tour on the Continent, which by your liberality he was of course enabled to take, I heard (with admiration) of the exertions he made in communicating the information he obtained to his young friends at home, and before I had the pleasure of knowing him. This, with other circumstances, made a most favorable impression on my mind, and I have frequently inquired why he was not brought forward for his native town. Mr. Brooks and myself have determined that he shall have it in his power on entering the House of Commons to state that his election has not cost him a shilling, in which plan we are not afraid of our friends' support. If there is any amount your son is out of pocket please to place it to the account of Potter & Morris, and write me by return of post."

The son of this gentleman, by a curious coincidence the Palmerstonian candidate for Manchester at the general election of 1856, defeated John Bright himself, whose popularity had waned for a time through uncompromising opposition to the Crimean and Chinese wars. But during the forty years John Bright sat in Parliament for Durham, Manchester, and Birmingham in succession, the precedent created by Sir Thomas Potter was followed by other friends, and he never had to pay any election expenses.

Many of his old free trade friends deserted John Bright when he called for further reform of the electoral system. If he was known as "the first Tribune of the British people," it was because

he battled almost unaided during a whole generation for the people's emancipation from the aristocratic jundos of Whig and Tory landowners who, even after the first Reform Act of 1832, governed the country by a Parliament in which the real manhood of the country was unrepresented. It was due to his persistent agitation that the right of voting for members of Parliament was twice extended, until every male householder in the three Kingdoms obtained a voice in the National government. He helped them, too, in winning the right to vote by ballot, in spite of the alarm cry in vogue before America became the fashion in Pall Mall, that he was "Americanizing our institutions." Alone he vindicated in Parliament the cause of the United States in its struggle with "that great conspiracy against human nature," to use his own words, of the Rebel South. It was his giant influence which kept the nation right on that question; and they and he together extinguished the Whig and Tory plots against the Union to which the Palmerston cabinet, with the sanction of Lord John Russell and Mr. Gladstone, were lending a willing ear. No Englishman had a truer love for the great English Republic across the Atlantic than he. In concluding his speech at the Rochdale meeting held to thank the merchants of New York for their relief of the suffering people of the Lancashire cotton districts, he said: "From the very outburst of this great convulsion I have had but one hope and one faith, and it is this—that the result of this stupendous strife may be to make freedom the heritage forever of a whole continent, and that the grandeur and the prosperity of the American Union may never be impaired."

In his library at One Ash, among the books and pictures that tell the history of his political life, hang portraits of George Washington and Abraham Lincoln, and the autographs, framed, of both these great Presidents. A bust of John Bright alone with John Hampden among British statesmen, placed by Abraham Lincoln in the White House at Washington, remains to-day a tribute to his championship of the American cause. John Bright seldom made an unsuccessful speech. Like other artists, however, he was nervous, anxious and irritable until his work was done. When his speech was over, he was as happy and sympathetic as a child. If it was a speech in the House of Commons he would retire to the members' smoking room, or stand with his back to the fire in the division lobby, and, surrounded by a group

of parliamentary friends run over the debate with trenchant humor. If it was a public meeting, he would fall into his host's easy chair with a cigar, and talk far into the night on a thousand trivial topics to which his language lent a thousand charms. Dogs, parrots, innkeepers, Scotch ministers, minor poets, royalties, American visitors, sayings and doings of the political world, Highland gamekeepers, great men and small men, all interested him. No one who has ever felt it will forget the fascination of that monologue which seemed to gather force and interest as the hours went by. All the genius of his matchless eloquence was there, directed to the kindly as well as the serious side of life. As in his talk, so in his speeches, humor succeeded pathos, and indignation alternated with satire. The strength and purity of his language were in harmony with the rich vibration of his voice, and any lack of gesture was atoned for by the noble earnestness of his presence and the dramatic power of his mouth and eye. He touched his subject with a broad hand: "Gladstone," he said, "goes coasting along, turning up every creek and exploring it to its source before he can proceed on his way; but I have no talent for detail. I hold my course from headland to headland through the great seas." Many of his happiest illustrations were the homeliest. One which delighted the political world at the time was pointed at Horsman and Lowe, who started the Whig secession that ultimately defeated the Reform Bill of 1866. "This party of two reminds me of the Scotch terrier which was so covered with hair that you could not tell which was the head and which was the tail of it." "This came into my head," he related afterwards, "as I was walking down to the house. I thought first that it would do, and then that it would not do, and I determined not to use it. And while I was speaking it suddenly turned up in my mind, and it was a great success."

Poetry was an abiding pleasure with him. His favorite authors were Milton, Whittier, Longfellow, and Byron, and he loved to read their works aloud evening after evening to his children. He explored the by-paths of literature for undiscovered poets. His memory was stored with poems, which he would repeat as he drove along in his quiet journeys with his sisters or children through Scotland or Italy. "There is nothing," he used to say, "which gives so much pleasure as poetry, except little children."

Now and then he would jot down a verse or an epigram of his own in the album of a hotel. In the visitors' book of a little Highland inn near Inverness he condensed his views on the land question in these words :

"In Highland glens 't is far too oft observed
That men are chased away, and game preserved;
Glen Urquhart is to me a lovelier glen,
Here grouse and deer have not supplanted men."

He interested himself in restoring to Michael Bruce, the poor Scotch schoolmaster and poet, the authorship of the exquisite lines to "The Cuckoo," which, after Bruce's death, had been pilfered by Logan and published under the latter's name; and he sealed his belief in the task by a pilgrimage to Bruce's grave. He loved Scotland, and, in a sort of way, the Scotch. He had a little family of Scotch terriers of whom he was very fond. But a dog rarely came near him that he did not caress. Salmon fishing became his favorite, and, latterly, his only outdoor occupation, and he was a frequent and welcome guest on the best reaches of the Tweed and the Tay. "But I do n't always like Scotch theology," he said once; "it's too full of the gridiron." He had more sympathy with Robert Burns and the Scotch poets. His own religion was found in the Sermon on the Mount. Creeds and formularies were not to his liking. At a certain dinner he turned from a Highland minister of opposite political opinions and assertive tongue with the remark: "It's odd that a man who knows so little about this world can tell us so much about the next."

In matters political, however, he never indulged in toleration. The least agreeable part of his nature was a Johnsonian brusqueness, which the presence of any opposition and above all of Toryism in the company usually brought to the front. Toryism had broken lances with him for the best part of his life, not always in chivalrous fashion, but ever with disastrous results to the Tories. In 1880, when that party were invoking the wrath of heaven upon those who supported Mr. Bradlaugh, the Radical free-thinking member for Northampton, in claiming the right to take his seat in Parliament, John Bright remarked: "It is not his atheism that those fellows are afraid of. It is the practical Christianity of his politics." But he usually reserved his serious displeasure for the Whigs "who ought to know better." Tories

were merely "fools," and could be summarily disposed of. Disraeli, however, who boasted that politics were the best form of gambling he knew, was taken by John Bright at his own estimate. "Dizzy did not dislike me," he once said with a twinkle in his eye, "for I never stood in his way." Palmerston, "that old sinner," as he called him, was a far more heinous offender. The bully of Europe, the sham Liberal and the cynical foe of reform, lost no opportunity of sneering at John Bright, and in his turn received no quarter from the apostle of non-intervention and the friend of the unenfranchised masses.

As his wife cared little for London life, John Bright always lived during the Parliamentary session in bachelor quarters, and probably never gave a dinner party in his life. For many years before his death he occupied a set of rooms in Piccadilly facing the Green Park. Here he breakfasted and smoked his morning cigar, and at ten o'clock he was accessible to every one who chose to call. He received his visitors in a grey dressing-gown. All were welcome; and it may be safely said that his kindest smile was for the struggling author, or for the American who sought him as the friend of America, often without other introduction than his nationality. Even on the streets of London his well-known face invited recognition; and many a time his hand was shaken by unknown travelers from the United States, men or women, whose names he never knew and whom he never saw again.

Whilst he held Cabinet office he transacted with his secretary, when his levee was over, his daily business as Minister of the Crown; after which he would sit down at a little old-fashioned desk and write his private letters, twenty or thirty every day. These were often penned on half sheets of paper, torn from the notes of his too numerous correspondents; but even in this scrappy guise they were models of neatness, written in a small and delicate hand. He never used an amanuensis or left the letter of a stranger unanswered. So punctilious was he in this courtesy that he not only thanked the people who forwarded him presentation copies of their books, but conscientiously read every volume. He even recognized the needs of autograph hunters, and he used to send them a few favorite hints of Whittier's with his signature below.

The portrait in the Reform Club by Frank Holl shows only the fighting side of the statesman whose social qualities found

there for over forty years their most congenial surroundings. A large part of John Bright's idle hours in London were spent in the old club house in Pall Mall so intimately associated with the history of English Liberalism. Though he was an habitual diner-out, he made but a pretence of the evening meal. After glancing over the day's papers at the club, he liked to make a dinner there in the afternoon, after which he would stroll from table to table in casual talk, and finally to the smoking-room or billiard-room, always surrounded by a knot of friends. Thus the day passed until it was time to go down to the House of Commons or out to dinner. Billiards was the only game he cared for, and if he never made a good player it was not for want of practice. By an unwritten but sacred law, the "little billiard-room" at the Reform Club was as absolutely at his disposal as was the corner seat on the third bench below the gangway in the House of Commons—a place in which, as all the world knows, no seat is specially appropriated to any member except, in some rare instance, by the tacit assent of the party to which he belongs.

As his influence in the country grew to be unquestioned, he became everywhere a privileged person. The Queen waived in favor of his Quaker principles the rigor of State etiquette. He had always shielded her name in political controversy, once from Tory attacks in her younger days, and also, as it happened once, from his own friends. Consequently, he was well received at Windsor; and when his relations with the Queen had become personal, he used to speak of her with peculiar respect. She was in his eyes "the most absolutely truthful and straightforward person he had ever met." In short, the man who for half a lifetime had been hated as a Jacobin by the self-styled respectable classes, and malignantly reviled by the *Times* and every scurrilous Tory print which represented their views, suddenly found his opinions treated with universal respect. And by a singular fate, he who had created the Liberal party of to day, and placed it in Mr. Gladstone's leadership, was the man who of all others wrecked that party and its leader at the hustings by a single speech on Home Rule addressed to his constituents at Birmingham on the eve of the polls of 1886. That act was the closing out of his own history. His friendship for Mr. Gladstone was over, and he refused to meet his former ally on any pretext of smoothing over their differences on public affairs. As the political tide flowed

past his own moorings he cared less for actual life ; but to the last he never abated the vigor of his invective against men or measures he disliked.

"There is nothing to tell in my life," he used to say to those who talked to him of a biography. "My speeches are my life." And in the copy of his published speeches which he gave to his sister Priscilla McLaren, he wrote the words "my political sermons." His judgment was true enough. No man ever achieved greater success in directing the public opinion and legislation of the nation. But ambition, wealth and social influence had no share in this. It was due to the power of his oratory, and this power depended, not merely on the classical perfection of his style, but on the religious earnestness of his motives, and the personality of the man himself. He was never spoilt by success. The Sunday after one of his most famous speeches in the House of Commons, on the administration of India, in which he first insisted on rational principles of government for the 250,000,000 inhabitants of that Empire, he took his seat as doorkeeper on a back bench of the Friends' Meeting House in his native town, as his name happened to fall in rotation for the duty. He lived simply and without ostentation in the house he had built before his first marriage, keeping the early hours of a country life. He died as he had lived, caressed by the little dog that had been his favorite, surrounded by children whom he loved, and with the consolation of a people's sympathy conveyed to him not alone by the Head of the Nation, but by tokens from the humblest homes. In a passage of perfect eloquence he left to the world his own story :

"I am not," said he in the House of Commons during the Crimean War, "nor did I ever pretend to be, a statesman ; and that character is so tainted and equivocal in our day that I am not sure that a pure and honorable ambition would aspire to it. I have not enjoyed for thirty years, like those noble Lords, the honors and emoluments of office. I have not set my sails to every passing breeze. I am a plain and simple citizen, sent here by one of the foremost constituencies of the Empire, representing feebly, perhaps, but honestly, I dare aver, the opinions of very many, and the true interests of all those who have sent me here. Let it not be said that I am alone in my condemnation of this war, and of this incapable and guilty administration. And, even if I were alone, if mine were a solitary voice, raised amid the din of arms and the clamors of a venal press, I should have the consolation I have to-night—and which I trust will be mine to the last moment of my existence—the priceless consolation that no word of mine has tended to promote the squandering of my country's treasure or the spilling of one drop of my country's blood."

CHARLES MCLAREN.